The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture John 1:1-9 Ephesians 3:3-10

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So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."
Psalm 90:12 (NSRV)

"Time flies when you're having fun," someone said. It does. It also seems to fly faster and faster, the more of it you experience. Have you noticed the law of accelerating time? The longer you live the quicker it passes. Have you also noticed how young those people have become who play the games that were on television all day Friday, Saturday and today? If you have been a sports fan, or theatre or Hollywood or opera for that matter, over the years I am sure you know about it. It wasn't so long ago it seems that baseball players were wizened, stolid, mature men; then they were my peers; then just slightly younger than I. Most of us intentionally stop the process right there — the athletes are just a bit younger. And then you're watching on television and one of them removes a cap or helmet and you come to the devastating reality that they are the age of your children, younger than your children, in fact.

In his year-end newsletter, Martin Marty has some fun with the topic. "How old do you feel?" he asked, and referred to W. H. Auden who thought we all have within us an age that we think of ourselves as being. (Marty thinks of himself as thirty-five.) He quotes a Dartmouth psychiatrist who recently wrote about the topic: "In my own aging process I find it almost hilarious to look into the mirror. Looking back at me is a fifty-year-old man. Looking into the mirror is a person who feels twelve."

The doctor was inspired by current neurological research. "The subcortical structures of our brain, in charge of feelings, change very little with aging." So, in fact, we do feel like a much younger person. [Michael S. Gazzaniga, in *Context*, 12/15/92]

The trouble, of course, is we are not. The mystery of it, is *time*; it keeps moving. And if we don't know that, or if we invest all of our energy denying it, we are going to make some foolish mistakes. We may also miss a lot.

"Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" the Psalmist wrote. Know what time it is. Know what time of your life you are currently living. Be aware — recognize — be appropriate and graceful about the time of your life.

Psalm 90 which we read together and which has been beautifully put to music in the favorite hymn "Our God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come" is an elegant and somewhat enigmatic poem. Scholars of Old Testament literature and of Hebrew thought pay a lot of attention to it. It was the favorite of University of Chicago theologian, Joseph Sittler. He almost always found a way to refer to it and quote it, no matter what he was talking about. He lectured on it, used it in a sermon text when he was invited to preach and when he was in charge of the brief ten-week course on practical ministry — always required students to prepare a sermon on Psalm 90. I still have mine. It's pretty embarrassing actually. I'm not sure anyone can understand what that Psalm is about until he or she has put in a little more time than twenty-five years.

In any event, it was from Sittler that I learned that the specific category of Psalm into which number 90 falls is called a Communal Lament. It is, at heart, a corporate complaint to God. And the liberal translation of the complaint is familiar: "Life isn't fair."

After the requisite compliments to the Almighty:

> "You have been our dwelling place for generations.
> "You've been around longer than the mountains
> "A thousand years are like a few minutes to you. . . ."

The Psalmist gets down to business:

> "You turn us back to dust
> We're about as substantial as dry grass . . .
> Compared to you, we're around about as long as a dream."

It isn't fair!

So, help us do what we must do. Help us number our days so we may gain a wise heart. There is in the scriptures of the Old Testament something called a "Wisdom Tradition." Wisdom is highly valued in the Book of Proverbs, for instance; and Ecclesiastes and in many of the Psalms. A wise person is one who is appropriate, graceful — not particularly one who has a lot of knowledge or skill; that would be the modern Western definition of wisdom. The wise person in this tradition is one who knows what time it is, who lives creatively and responsively and appropriately in the time of his or her life.

The opposite, the foolish person, is one who does not know what time it is. A fool, in Biblical terms, is a person who denies the movement of time, who ignores aging, for instance, who clings desperately to the past, or who longingly waits for the future and in the process is alienated from the present.

It struck me that that is a good analysis of the perennial human dilemma: caught, on the one hand, between desperately clinging to the past, and on the other hand, waiting for real life to come in the future, and in the meantime forgetting to live fully in the present.

It has been suggested that Psalm 90, which is listed as a prayer of Moses, was Moses' prayer as he came to the Jordan River, late in his life, looked across and saw the promised land, which he had been pursuing for most of his adult life, and realized he wasn't going to make it. He personally was not going to cross the river and enter the land of milk and honey; he could only see it from afar.

And I wondered if Jesus, too, when at the age of thirty-three, he felt the walls closing in and had to come to terms with the fact that the present was all he had. I wondered if he didn't think about and pray Moses' prayer:

> "Let the favor of God be upon me prosper for me — the work of my hands."

How pertinent this ancient poem is in helping us come to a sense of the time of our lives. The old issues remain nearly the same. Life is short; it isn't fair. So we need to know how to deal with it now, to do whatever is necessary to be wise and to prosper the work of our hands.

Erik Erikson, a pioneer in human development theory, taught that one way to do that was to understand human development, or aging, in terms of eight stages — each with a particular issue to resolve, from infancy through old age.

We know that there is a time to learn, for instance. Emerson said somewhere that an idea can be grasped only when the mind is ripe for that idea. That's a good concept to remember when you want a seven-year-old to appreciate a beautiful scene in nature, for instance; or when you are assuming your thirteen-year-old will appreciate the history of London in the Middle Ages. Lewis Thomas writes delightfully about the difficulty adults have learning languages and how absolutely simple it is for children. We have a gene for learning languages in childhood, Thomas concludes, and it weakens and gradually disappears. If that is true — and no one argues that it isn't — wisdom and simple prudence dictates paying attention to education, the earlier the better: using just a portion of the cost of holding prisoners in our crowded jails — to fully fund Operation Headstart — which incredibly we still have not done.

One of the major issues for adults, Erikson taught, is generativity or stagnation.

For many young and middle adults, human development stops. Erikson put it memorably: "The unhealthy narcissism of middle age can turn one into one's own favorite child, pampered, coddled, spoiled." The result — stagnation, boredom, staleness.

Parker Palmer calls boredom the major spiritual problem of our age. And John Gardner, addressing the graduating class at Stanford last year, wondered out loud about why some men and women go to seed while others remain vital all of their lives — why some people who stop learning or growing or trying? You can keep the zest until the day you die, he said, and offered a simple maxim: "Be interested . . . keep your curiosity, your sense of wonder; discover new things; care — risk — reach out."

So on this first Sunday of a new year, the occasion when we do a little looking backward and forward, and engage in annual stock-taking and priority-setting called New Year Resolutions, what might we learn from the wisdom tradition of the Bible and the insights of modern psychology?

Let me make four suggestions.

First, and basic to all the rest: living in the present and assuming responsibility for the time given to us. Whatever time of life it is for you — it's yours. It's your only life. And there is only one person who can live it. Sounds simple, but we are inclined to act as if we are victims of fate, or time, instead of responsible adults in charge of our own lives. I attended an unusual meeting of 500 Presbyterians recently who were asked to come up with a vision for the church's future. The technique was fascinating: anyone who had an issue was invited to express it and then lead a group of other interested people in discussing it. The leader/enabler, Harrison Owen, acknowledged that many people might be frustrated or disappointed in the direction the discussion went.

"Remember the law of two feet," he said. "If you don't like it where you are, move. Don't complain, worse yet, don't sit there getting angry. Move your feet."

Not a bad maxim for life, I thought. If you don't like where you are, move. And if you cannot move, then do what is necessary to change whatever is making you unhappy. The heart of wisdom is knowing what time it is, and knowing as well that the time we're talking about belongs to us, is given to us to live and use and enjoy . . . and that no one else is responsible for its use.

Second: wisdom is knowing that there are limits. There are personal limits and there is a limit to the time we are given. That too seems simple enough and yet we have a lot of trouble with both ends of that equation.

Lewis Thomas characterizes our nation, compared to the older countries of Europe, as a young adult, no longer a tentative adolescent, but not having yet learned the adult lesson of limits. Young adults don't know about limits. Afraid of nothing, they are willing to try anything from sky diving to bungee jumping, inclined to excess in all things, supremely confident in their ability to do everything. The syndrome can be exciting and challenging in a young adult and becomes tragic and pathetic later.

"How can I fix it?" someone asked me recently as we talked about a problem situation in which his son was involved. "Maybe you can't," I had to say, realizing that those are difficult words for upwardly mobile, successful adults to say.

The reality of limits is an awkward fact for Western technological culture, Joe Sittler used to say. Death — the ultimate limit — is something of an embarrassment to a culture that utterly believes that intelligence, strength and enough money will solve every problem.

Wisdom in the Bible involves numbering your days and simply acknowledging that there are some things you can't do, or control, and that there is a limit to the time you have. You will not live forever.

And so the third suggestion is this: don't put off the important stuff. It may not be here yet but there will come a time when it is too late.

I have kept a clipping from another of Martin Marty's year- end newsletters from several years ago. He explained that on his study wall, to be read daily, is a motto given to him by a mentor and former bishop:

> "Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind."

Knowing what the time of your life is means sorting through all the infinite possibilities, deciding what you want to do and starting to do it. And, may I suggest, among those things, most important among them are telling those you love that you love them.

"Oh, be swift to love. . . ."

Don't save it. Don't hoard love in your heart. You know who the most important people in the world are to you. You know how long it has been since you told them. And maybe you are one of those extraordinary folk who have never verbalized this love. So, just do it. Give them a squeeze and tell them. Call them today. Say it - "I love you. You may forget it at times: at times it may seem like I don't, but I really do; I love you." It's really easy and quite nice, actually.

And that leads to suggestion number four.

Erik Erikson said that the adult who negotiates all the tricky passages of development will, in maturity, ha· become generative.

> "To have found a way, by midlife and beyond, in our love and work, to contribute to the maintenance of the human soul, and to extend the conditions in social life that will make it possible for the next generation to have optimal opportunity to develop their full measure of human strength."
> [James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, p. 29]

So be generative. Generate life and healing and compassion. Be a factor in the future. Give yourself - your time, your money, your ideas and leadership. You won't take anything with you, so find what you care deeply about and give yourself to it.

You know that I like a lot of what Frederick Buechner ~~says and~~ writes. ~~This, I think, is my favorite.~~ It's ~~from a~~ book called *Alphabet of Grace,* and it follows the clock through one day in the author's life:

> "You are alive. It needn't have been so. It wasn't so once, and it will not be so forever. But it is so now. And what is it like: to be alive in this maybe one place of all places anywhere where life is? Live a day of it and see. Take any day and be alive in it. Nobody claims that it will be entirely painless, but no matter."
> [p. 36]

There is beneath this entire matter of timeliness a big issue. It is named in Psalm 90's lament. Are we really like the grass that fades and withers? Is there no more substance to us than a dream that disappears in the morning? Is there anything more to us than the pages of accumulated calendars, or the ticking of the clock?

We Christians have recently celebrated the birth of a child. What that event means to us is never quite adequately expressed in all the festivity, all the lovely Christmas celebrating. Because finally we believe that this child's birth means that the power of time, which means the power of our own mortality, has been broken. Our life, we believe, our time, is not merely a running down, time diminishing, the sand running out of the glass and finally disappearing. What we believe is the opposite: that because of this child our lives are a process of development and fulfillment and completion; and difficult as it is to express, even sometime to believe, that in this child our lives have eternal significance.

"~~Our dwelling place in all generations. . . .~~"

Professor Sittler wrote:

> "He — and he meant Jesus the Christ — He is the road and he is the goal. He became the traveler. He is where I began, he is my journey, and my home at the last."

So, do know what time it is and do live it fully and passionately, and do have the time of your life because in the birth of the child, the ancient lament is answered and the promise is kept.

> "Our God, our help in ages past,
> Our hope for years to come,
> Our shelter from the stormy blast,
> And our eternal home."

Amen.

include the Alternative Ending, see p5 of my written manuscript